Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

Review of *Gender/Fucking* by Florence Ashley (CLASH Books)

by Collin Hawley | Book Reviews, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT *Gender/Fucking*, described by author Florence Ashley as academic smut, combines erotica, theory, poetry, and personal narrative to critique and offer an alternative method to contemporary approaches within scholarly work on gender and sexuality. Ashley draws on her personal experience (though she explains that some of the narratives are hyperbolic or fabulations) of being trans, both positive and negative. She argues that academic conversations about sex should consider bodily epistemologies and move away from purely theoretical abstraction. For Ashley, sex may not be the key to liberation, but it functions as an important element of everyday life, and thus requires that scholars engage it in all its complexity, contradictions, and messiness.

KEYWORDS bodily epistemology, gender, trans studies

Gender/Fucking. By Florence Ashley. Troy, NY: CLASH Books, 2023, 167 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781955904933. US List: $16.95

Florence Ashley's *Gender/Fucking* offers a provocative reconsideration of the heuristics of contemporary gender and sexuality studies. Her semi-autobiographical text combines smut, poetry, and theory linked by the idea of "bodily epistemology": "Some truths can only be told through the erotic. Polaroid captures of the messiness of life in its rawest forms. There's so little appreciation for the knowledge that comes with arousal. We instead associate it with unthought, with primal urges that override our ability to understand and reason" (9–10). Ashley's prose models this production of knowledge by moving seamlessly between theoretical musings and "personal"[1] narratives of trans bodily

experiences, both erotic and medical. Each chapter examines a particular element of her sexual life from this mixed perspective of theory and sex. Throughout, she is unafraid of contradiction and ambiguity, instead leaning into the messiness of sexuality and life: "Trans lives are lived at a critical juncture of de/sexualization; depicted as hypersexual precisely to shame us into divesting from sex" (11–12). Using bodily epistemology as a guiding method, she challenges the desexualization that she argues suffuses academia and explains that the embodiment of sex is essential to understanding the complexity of contemporary sexual life.

Ashley uses the words in her title, "gender, fuck, and genderfuck" to describe "the political element in exploring and revealing gender through sexuality and sexuality through gender. Balancing out the medical and exclusionary resonances of the word 'transsexual,' genderfuck rejects neoliberal modes of living and attempts to discipline and standardize gender" (14). Chapter 1, "Sexually Transmitted Transitude" complicates the fallacious belief that transness is a "social contagion," yet also suggests that there are "the seeds of a poetic, affective truth" that trans people are drawn to each other, love each other, and should hold "open the possibility that every cis person is in a state of becoming toward transitude" (20). Chapter 2 considers the fetishization of trans women by straight men, who are called "chasers." She describes her ambivalence regarding their attraction to her "phallic femininity" which is "never-quite-female," as "dystrust," a portmanteau of dysphoria and distrust (29). Complicating attraction, she wrestles with the possibility that via patriarchal values all attraction is fetishism and is grounded in the acquisitional logics of capital.

Chapter 3 rehearses anti-trans scholarship that describes trans people as medical monstrosities that "eradicate gender nonconformity" (43), setting the stage for the thickly described narrative account of vaginoplasty (that she explains is not not autoethnographic) in chapter 4. Chapter 5 builds on the previous chapter's possibly fictional narrative, describing her feelings of disconnection from her

body and erotic self because of an excessive ease in achieving orgasm after her vaginomancy(plasty). She explains that women's orgasm for men serves as a "measure of [men's] sexual prowess" and she differentiates it from the satisfaction of desires, offering dollhood as a descriptor for this feeling of dissatisfaction, "The slut is played *with*, the doll is *played* with" (73–74, emphasis in original). In chapter 6, Ashley reflects on a painful experience of sexual abuse by a trans woman, which she agonizes over not only because of her persistent trauma but also because of her reticence to share her experience for the fear of her experience being used to further demonize trans women. In the end, returning to the messiness and contradictions of sexual life, she explains, "Neither demon nor monster, she who hurt me is human" (96).

In chapter 7, Ashley describes how gender and sexual identities do not fit into easy or fixed categories. After reflecting on her own sexual history, which became simpler with men after her vaginomancy, she offers a means of complicating sexual behaviors and choices, "Reflecting on the complexity of queerness, maybe we should better distinguish sexual comfort, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. Often, they fall out of line with one another. If sexual identity is built upon a deeper sense of self, sexual comfort is often bound up with past traumatic experience, and sexual behavior is dictated in part by who is interested in having sex with you" (105). Chapter 8 exemplifies the multi-generic composition of the text, one that incorporates poetry, erotica, and theory. This chapter, "Triton and the Nereid," complicates the adjacent chapters on the traumas and messiness within sex through a positive, mythologically inflected erotic narrative. In chapter 9, Ashley describes her fear of topping because of her trauma and fear of traumatizing others, alongside descriptions of the transmisogynistic rhetoric that trans existence is equivalent to rape (118–120). She explains the persistent pain of this hate, "My rebuttals, my human rights, my science will never satisfy, for it is my existence that offends, not what I do with it" (122).

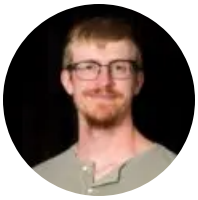
Chapter 10 returns to the notion of bodily epistemology, pushing back against the cold abstractions of academia: “Revolutionary thought begins when we realize that the ills and wells of the body are generative. That the body is not secondary, not an inconvenience to be suppressed as we pursue unearthly ideals. It comes from the realization that the rational economic mind is no rationality of ours. Abstraction is a flawed epistemology. Ours must be one of love” (150). The final chapter builds on the previous chapter with the idea of palliative activism, what she describes as a kind of “content pessimism” in the face of the intractable despair and hopelessness for change under late capitalism: “Its goal is to ease pains, like a balm after the sun; to cultivate comfort and love among the suffering” (161).

Ashley’s book, by foregrounding personal experience, demands that its readers reflect and reconsider how sex is conceptualized in academic discourse and, as a result, is discursively incomplete in these spaces. By re-injecting sex into sexuality studies, Ashley illustrates the importance of rejecting monolithic conceptions of gender and sexual experience and its contradictory embodiments: “Sex is messy; that’s what I love about it. It is pleasure and pain; it is ambivalent, ambiguous. It is human—part of the multiplicity in our beings that does not, should not be singled out for severance from those of us who house it. Sexuality is not liberation, but perhaps we can learn about the path to liberation from it” (12–13). Scholars in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, including but not limited to those interested in trans studies, will find Ashley’s provocations and complications of contemporary sexual practices useful to their work.

Notes

1. She explains that these narratives are both fictionalized and semi-fictionalized. ↩

Author Information



Collin Hawley

Collin Hawley holds a Bachelor of Arts in photography and film studies as well as a Master of Arts in humanities with a concentration in cultural studies from Milligan University in Johnson City, Tenn. His research draws from his practical experience as an analog photographer and examines how the interfaces of visual technologies structure participation with practices of sexuality and the articulation of gendered subject formations. Currently, he is a doctoral student in George Mason's Cultural Studies Program.

View all of Collin Hawley's articles.

Article details

Collin Hawley, "Review of *Gender/Fucking* by Florence Ashley (CLASH Books)," *Lateral* 14.2 (2026).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L14.2.19

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Lateral is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053